

EL OBSERVADOR

September 25, 2007

Let's Give Our Kids a Head Start

By Assemblymember Joe Coto

In the face of mounting evidence on the benefits of pre-kindergarten and an emerging consensus on the need for education reform in California, momentum for expanding effective pre-k education is building in San Jose and across the state.

On Friday, I visited McKinley Preschool in San Jose and saw just what an effective pre-kindergarten program looks like.

When I entered the preschool classroom, I saw a well trained teacher whose smiling students confidently answered questions and shared their thoughts.

As the children visited different learning stations, it was clear that they were having fun. But they weren't just playing - they were also learning social and academic skills that will prepare them for the K-12 education.

As 4-year-old Michelle eagerly painted a picture of herself, she was also strengthening her hand-eye coordination, mastering her colors, learning how to follow directions, and building the confidence and love of school that will serve her well throughout her educational career. And as I sat down to have breakfast with Abigail, she was not only learning about fruits and healthy eating, but also gaining the listening and cooperation skills that will help her enter kindergarten ready to learn.

As a former elementary school teacher and superintendent, I've seen the difference that pre-k makes. I've seen it in the students, and heard it from parents and teachers. Giving kids a boost at the base of the education ladder helps prepare them for the long climb up. A statewide poll found 95 percent of kindergarten teachers say their students who attended preschool are better prepared for kindergarten.

Teachers aren't the only ones confirming the benefits of preschool.

Recently, a 20-year study of a Chicago pre-k program for low-income children found that participants had higher educational attainment and lower felony arrests than children who did not attend preschool. Participating children were also less likely to be held back a grade or be referred to special education.

Unfortunately, not all kids have the opportunity to attend an effective pre-k program like the one I visited at McKinley. There are long waiting lists at many publicly funded pre-k programs, and the children who lack access to preschool are disproportionately children of color.

As I looked around at the McKinley students, 90 percent of whom are Latino, I realized that expanding access to pre-kindergarten is an important step toward reducing the achievement gap that plagues our schools. Research shows that much of the disparity in fourth grade reading scores between Latino and white children can be attributed to a divide that exists when they start kindergarten. We need to intervene early to address the readiness gap before it becomes the achievement gap. Effective pre-k programs show substantial gains for Latino children. For example, test scores for Latinos who participated in Oklahoma's pre-k program improved 54 percent, reflecting sharp gains in both cognitive development and language skills.

Education has always been one of my top priorities, and as a member of the Assembly's Committee on Education, I am working to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed in school. In 2005, I authored a bill to award grants to establish and maintain training and career ladder opportunities for teachers who provide preschool instruction to English learners, who make up 40 percent of California's preschoolers. Education will also be one of the main focuses of the Latino Caucus next year, and we hope to present comprehensive preschool legislation in 2008.

Education reform begins with effective pre kindergarten programs. A study by the RAND Corporation found that investing public money to make preschool available to every 4 year old in California would generate an estimated \$2 to \$4 in benefits for every dollar spent. The study proves what teachers and parents at McKinley Preschool already know: an investment in our children and our schools is an investment in California's future.

There is nothing more important than giving our children a head start to make sure they succeed in school and have the confidence and skills to achieve their dreams. Such an investment in education has to start with preschool.

Joe Coto, (D-District 23, San Jose, CA). Assemblymember, California State Legislature. Chair of the Latino Caucus.